

A visit to a green parish

Carol Meyer | May. 10, 2011 Eco Catholic

Let me tell you about my surprising visit to St. Francis of the Earth Catholic Church last Sunday while I was traveling.

Upon arriving, I notice that the parking lot is only half full of cars, but the bike racks, on the other hand, are crowded with colorful bikes of all sizes. People are streaming in on foot too, talking and laughing with their neighbors who made the jaunt from home with them.

As I enter the church, I am bathed in natural soft light from the sky lights and the many windows. What additional illumination is needed comes from LED lights.

The church furnishings are made from natural products and no carpets can be seen anywhere. Plants and seasonal flowers grown by parishioners adorn the sanctuary.

To prepare for the opening hymn, I reach for a hymnal, only to find none in sight. When I look around puzzled, a parishioner leans over and explains that they are as paper-free as possible and that the music will be projected on a big screen at the front of church. She says they do have a few booklets with the order of the Mass for those who need one and not to expect a bulletin, because everyone reads it online.

I'm delighted that the celebrant effortlessly weaves Earth care into his homily and seems to have a sophisticated grasp of creation theology and spirituality. During the Prayers of the Faithful, we pray for the victims of the most recent environmental disaster.

At the announcements, Father Gaia rattles off an impressive number of environment-related educational offerings, service projects, and outings. And he invites parishioners to sign the petition at the back of church regarding a current piece of environmental legislation, which I notice later that almost everyone does.

Someone invites me to the parish vegan potluck being held after Mass, so I happily oblige. The food is delicious and the conversation uplifting, reflecting the social-justice consciousness of the majority of people. We eat on real plates, with real silverware, using cloth napkins. The Green Committee has organized a dish-washing crew. The food scraps are taken out to the compost pile by their church's organic vegetable garden.

The buildings and grounds manager offers to take me on a tour of the facility, which was recently renovated. He explains how they upgraded to the highest energy-efficiency equipment and added insulation and recounts how much money it is saving them. He even shows me a restroom with its water efficiency stools with the dual-flush design. I ask how they raised the money for these improvements, and he says people were really generous and delighted to make the sacrifice because they love God's Earth and would do anything to protect it.

He is really proud of the solar panels on the roof of the church and rectory, and explains how they are almost a carbon-free parish and steadily moving toward that goal.

It's been a long morning, and I'm about ready for my Sunday afternoon nap, but he insists on showing me around the grounds, explaining the rationale for the rain gardens, the xeriscaping and use of native plants, the wildlife and wildflower area, and the meditation garden. He explains that they've cut back on the grass so much that it's now possible to mow with a push machine like in the old days. Everything is organic and natural, he explains, and no one minds a few weeds.

As I take my leave, I'm a bit overwhelmed with all I've seen and learned, but definitely highly impressed. And I must confess that I am feeling more than proud that Catholics are leading the way on making substantive change toward a viable and sustainable future.

NCR's Eco Catholic Blog

Eco Catholic is an exploration of the green Catholic imagination and ecological spirituality. Contributors include Rich Heffern, *NCR* staff writer, columnist and author, and Carol Meyer, executive director of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition.

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